

FOUR LETTERS

BY

OSCAR WILDE

WHICH WERE NOT INCLUDED IN THE
ENGLISH EDITION

OF

“DE PROFUNDIS”



PRIVATELY PRINTED 1906



The Bancroft Library

University of California • Berkeley

PAULINE FORE MOFFITT LIBRARY

“DE PROFUNDIS”
SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

FOUR LETTERS

BY

OSCAR WILDE

WHICH WERE NOT INCLUDED IN THE
ENGLISH EDITION

OF

“DE PROFUNDIS”



PRIVATELY PRINTED

1906

SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS

January 6th, 1896.

MY DEAR ROBBIE,

Consider now, my dear Robbie, my proposal. I think my wife, who in money matters is most honourable and high-minded, will refund the £75 paid for my share. I have no doubt she will. But I think it should be offered from me, and that I should not accept anything in the way of income from her ; I can accept what is given in love and affection to me, but I could not accept what is doled out grudgingly or with conditions. I would sooner let my wife be quite free. She may marry again. In any case I think

that if free she would allow me to see my children from time to time. That is what I want. But I must set her free first, and had better do it as a gentleman by bowing my head and accepting everything. You must consider the whole question, as it is through you and your ill-advised action it is due : and let me know what you and others think. Of course you acted for the best. But you were wrong in your view. I may say candidly that I am getting gradually to a state of mind when I think that everything that happens is for the best. This may be philosophy, or a broken heart, or religion, or the dull apathy of despair. But, whatever its origin, the feeling is strong with me. To tie my wife to me

against her will would be wrong. She has a full right to her freedom. And not to be supported by her would be a pleasure to me. It is an ignominious position to be a pensioner on her. Talk over this with More Adey. Get him to show you the letter I have written to him. Ask your brother Aleck to give me his advice. He has excellent wisdom on things.

Now to other points.

I have never had the chance of thanking you for the books. They were most welcome. Not being allowed the magazines was a blow, but Meredith's novel charmed me. What a sane artist in temper! He is quite right in his assertion of sanity as the essential in romance. Still, up to the present only the abnormal

have found expression in life and literature. Rossetti's letters are dreadful, obviously forgeries by his brother. I was interested, however, to see how my grand-uncle's "Melmoth," and my mother's "Sidonia" have been two of the books that fascinated his youth. As regards the conspiracy against him in later years, I believe it really existed, and that the funds for it came out of Hake's Bank. The conduct of a thrush in Cheyne Walk seems to be most suspicious, though William Rossetti says : " I could discern nothing in the thrush's song at all out of the common." Stevenson's letters are most disappointing also — I see that romantic surroundings are the worst surroundings possible for a romantic writer.

In Gower Street Stevenson could have written a new "Trois Mousquetaires." In Samoa he wrote letters to *The Times* about Germans. I see also the traces of a terrible strain to lead a natural life. To chop wood with any advantage to oneself, or profit to others, one should not be able to describe the process. In point of fact the natural life is the unconscious life. Stevenson merely extended the sphere of the artificial by taking to digging. The whole dreary book has given me a lesson. If I spend my future life reading Baudelaire in a café I shall be leading a more natural life than if I take to hedger's work or plant cacao in mud-swamps. "En Route" is most over-rated. It is sheer journalism.

It never makes one hear a note of the music it describes. The subject is delightful, but the style is, of course, worthless, slipshod, flaccid. It is worse French than Ohnet's. Ohnet tries to be commonplace and succeeds. Huysman tries not to be, and is. . . . Hardy's novel is pleasant, and Harold Frederic's very interesting in matter. . . . Later on, there being hardly any novels in the prison library for the poor imprisoned fellows I live with, I think of presenting the Library with about a dozen good novels : Stevenson's (none here but "The Black Arrow"), some of Thackeray's (none here), Jane Austen (none here), and some good Dumas-père-like books, by Stanley Weyman, for instance, and any modern

young man. You mentioned Henley had a protégé? Also the Anthony Hope man. After Easter you might make out a list of about fourteen and apply to let me have them. They would please the few who do not care about De Goncourt's journal. Don't forget I would pay myself for them. I have a horror myself of going out into a world without a single book of my own. I wonder would there be any of my friends, such as Cosmo Lennox, Reggie Turner, Gilbert Burgess, Max, and the like, who would give me a few books. You know the sort of books I want : Flaubert, Stevenson, Baudelaire, Maeterlinck, Dumas père, Keats, Marlowe, Chatterton, Coleridge, Anatole France, Gautier, Dante and all Dante literature ;

Goethe and Goethe literature, and so on. I would feel it a great compliment to have books waiting for me—and perhaps there may be some friends who would like to be kind to me. One is really very grateful, though I fear I often seem not to be. But then remember I have had incessant worries besides prison-life.

In answer to this you can send me a long letter all about plays and books. Your handwriting, in your last, was so dreadful that it looked as if you were writing a three-volume novel on the terrible spread of communistic ideas among the rich, or in some other way wasting a youth that always has been, and always will remain, quite full of promise. If I wrong you in ascribing it

to such a cause, you must make allowances for the morbidity produced by long imprisonment. But do write clearly. Otherwise it looks as if you had something to conceal.

There is much that is horrid, I suppose, in this letter. But I had to blame you to yourself, not to others. Read my letter to More. Harris comes to see me on Saturday, I hope. Remember me to Arthur Clifton and his wife, who, I find, is so like Rossetti's wife—the same lovely hair—but of course a sweeter nature, though Miss Siddal is fascinating and her poem *AI*.

Yours ever,

OSCAR.

10th March 1896.

MY DEAR ROBBIE,

I want you to have a letter written at once to Mr ——, the solicitor, stating that as my wife has promised to settle a third on me, in the case of her predeceasing me, I do not wish any opposition to be made to her purchasing my life interest. I feel that I have brought such unhappiness on her and such ruin on my children that I have no right to go against her wishes in anything. She was gentle and good to me here, when she came to see me. I have full trust in her. Please have this done at once, and thank my friends for their

kindnesses. I feel I am acting rightly leaving this to my wife.

Please write to Stuart Merrill in Paris, or Robert Sherard, to say how gratified I was at the performance of my play, and have my thanks conveyed to Lugne-Pœe ; it is something that at a time of disgrace and shame I should be still regarded as an artist : I wish I could feel more pleasure, but I seem dead to all emotion except those of anguish and despair. However, please let Lugne-Pœe know that I am sensible of the honour he has done me. He is a poet himself. I fear you will find it difficult to read this, but as I am not allowed writing materials I seem to have forgotten how to write—you must excuse me. Thank More for

exerting himself for books for me ; un-
luckily I suffer from headaches when I
read my Greek and Roman poets—so
they have not been of much use—but his
kindness was great in getting the set.
Ask him to express my gratitude to the
lady who lives at Wimbledon. Write to
me, please, in answer to this and tell me
about literature, what new books, etc.,—
also Jones' play and Forbes-Robertson's
management—about any new tendency
in the stage of Paris or London. Also
try and see what Lemaître, Bauer, and
Sarcey said of "Salome," and give me a
little resumé : please write to Henri and
say I am touched at his writing nicely.
Robert Sherard knows him. It was sweet
of you to come and see me. You must

come again next time. Here I have the horror of death with the still greater horror of living, and in silence and misery. . . .

.

I always remember you with deep affection.

I wish Ernest would get from Oakley Street my portmanteau, fur-coat, clothes, and the books of my own writing which I gave my dear mother—ask —— in whose name the burial ground of my mother was taken.

Always your friend,

OSCAR WILDE.

April 1st, 1897.

MY DEAR ROBBIE,

I send you a MS. separate from this, which I hope will arrive safely. As soon as you have read it, I want you to have it carefully copied for me. There are many causes why I wish this to be done. One will suffice. I want you to be my literary executor in case of my death, and to have complete control of my plays, books, and papers. As soon as I find I have a legal right to make a will, I will do so. My wife does not understand my art, nor could be expected to have any interest in it, and Cyril is only a child. So I turn naturally to you, as indeed I do for everything,

and would like you to have all my works. The deficit that their sale will produce may be lodged to the credit of Cyril and Vivian. Well if you are my literary executor, you must be in possession of the only document that gives any explanation of my extraordinary behaviour. . . . When you have read the letter, you will see the psychological explanation of a course of conduct that from the outside seems a combination of absolute idiotcy with vulgar bravado. Some day the truth will have to be known—not necessarily in my lifetime . . . but I am not prepared to sit in the grotesque pillory they put me into, for all time ; for the simple reason that I inherited from my father and mother a

name of high distinction of literature and art, and I cannot for eternity allow that name to be degraded. . . . I don't defend my conduct. I explain it. Also there are in my letter certain passages which deal with my mental development in prison, and the inevitable evolution of my character and intellectual attitude towards life that has taken place : and I want you and others who still stand by me and have affection for me to know exactly in what mood and manner I hope to face the world. Of course from one point of view I know that on the day of my release I shall be merely passing from one prison into another, and there are times when the whole world seems to me no larger than my cell and as full

of terror for me. Still I believe that at the beginning God made a world for each separate man, and in that world which is within us one should seek to live. At any rate you will read those parts of my letter with less pain than the others. Of course I need not remind you how fluid a thing thought is with me—with us all—and of what an evanescent substance are our emotions made. Still, I do see a sort of possible goal towards which, through art, I may progress. It is not unlikely that you may help me.

As regards the mode of copying : of course it is too long for any amanuensis to attempt : and your own handwriting, dear Robbie, in your last letter, seems specially designed to remind me that the

task is not to be yours.
. . . I think that the only thing to do is to be thoroughly modern and to have it typewritten. Of course, the MSS. should not pass out of your control, but could you not get Mrs Marshall to send down one of her typewriting girls—women are the most reliable as they have no memory for the important—to Hornton Street or Phillimore Gardens, to do it under your supervision? I assure you that the typewriting machine, when played with expression, is not more annoying than the piano when played by a sister or near relation. Indeed many among those most devoted to domesticity prefer it. I wish the copy to be done not on tissue paper but on good paper

such as is used for plays, and a wide rubricated margin should be left for corrections. . . . If the copy is done at Hornton Street the lady typewriter might be fed through a lattice in the door, like the Cardinals when they elect a Pope ; till she comes out on the balcony and can say to the world : “ Habet Mundus Epistolam,” for indeed it is an Encyclical letter, and as the Bulls of the Holy Father are named from their opening words, it may be spoken of as the “ Epistola : in Carcere et Vinculis.” . . . In point of fact, Robbie, prison life makes one see people and things as they really are. That is why it turns one to stone. It is the people outside who are deceived by the illusions of a life in constant motion.

They revolve with life and contribute to its unreality. We who are immobile both see and know. Whether or not the letter does good to narrow natures and hectic brains, to me it has done good. I have "cleansed my bosom of much perilous stuff"; to borrow a phrase from the poet whom you and I once thought of rescuing from the Philistines. I need not remind you the mere expression is to an artist the supreme and only mode of life. It is by utterance that we live. Of the many, many things for which I have to thank the Governor there is none for what I am more grateful than for his permission to write fully and at as great a length as I desire. For nearly two years I had within a growing burden of bitter-

ness, much of which I have now got rid of. On the other side of the prison wall there are some poor black soot-besmirched trees that are just breaking out into buds of an almost shrill green. I know quite well what they are going through. They are finding expression.

Ever yours,

OSCAR.

H.M. PRISON, READING.

. . . To these purely business matters perhaps More Adey will kindly reply. His letter dealing purely with business, I shall be allowed to receive. It will not, I mean, interfere with your literary letter with regard to which the Governor has just now read me your kind message.

For myself, my dear Robbie, I have little to say that can please you. The refusal to commute my sentence has been like a blow from a leaden sword. I am dazed with a dull sense of pain. I had fed on hope, and now anguish, grown hungry, feeds her fill on me as though she had been starved of her proper appetite. There are, however, kinder elements in

this evil prison air than before : sympathies have been shown to me, and I no longer feel entirely isolated from humane influences, which was before a source of terror and trouble to me. And I read Dante, and make excerpts and notes for the pleasure of using a pen and ink. And it seems as if I were better in many ways, and I am going to take up the study of German. Indeed prison seems to be the proper place for such a study. There is a thorn, however—as bitter as that of St Paul, though different—that I must pluck out of my flesh in this letter. It is caused by a message you wrote on a piece of paper for me to see. I feel that if I kept it secret it might grow in my mind (as poisonous

things grow in the dark) and take its place with other terrible thoughts that gnaw me. . . . Thought, to those that sit alone and silent and in bonds, being no "winged living thing," as Plato feigned it, but a thing dead, breeding what is horrible like a slime that shows monsters to the moon.

I mean, of course, what you said about the sympathies of others being estranged from me, or in danger of being so, by the deep bitterness of my feelings: and I believe that my letter was lent and shown to others. . . . Now, I don't like my letters shown about as curiosities: it is most distasteful to me. I write to you freely as to one of the dearest friends I have, or have ever had: and, with a

few exceptions, the sympathy of others touches me, as far as its loss goes, very little. No man of my position can fall into the mire of life without getting a great deal of pity from his inferiors ; and I know that when plays last too long spectators tire. My tragedy has lasted far too long ; its climax is over ; its end is mean ; and I am quite conscious of the fact that when the end does come I shall return an unwelcome visitant to a world that does not want me. *A revenant*, as the French say, as one whose face is grey with long imprisonment and crooked with pain. Horrible as are the dead when they rise from their tombs, the living who come out from tombs are more horrible still. Of all this I am only

too conscious. When one has been for eighteen terrible months in a prison cell, one sees things and people as they really are. The sight turns one to stone. Do not think that I would blame anyone for my vices. My friends had as little to do with them as I had with theirs. Nature was in this matter a stepmother to all of us. I blame them for not appreciating the man they ruined. As long as my table was red with wine and roses, what did they care? My genius, my life as an artist, my work, and the quiet I needed for it, were nothing to them. . . . I admit I lost my head. . . . I was bewildered, incapable of judgment. I made the one fatal step. And now . . . I sit here on a bench in a prison cell. In all tragedies

there is a grotesque element. You know the grotesque element in mine. Do not think I do not blame myself. I curse myself night and day for my folly in allowing something to dominate my life. If there was an echo in these walls, it would cry "Fool!" for ever. I am utterly ashamed of my friendships. . . . For by their friendships men can be judged. It is a test of every man. And I feel poignant abasement of shame for my friendships . . . of which you may read a full account in my trial.

It is to me a daily source of mental humiliation. Of some of them I never think. They trouble me not. It is of no importance. . . . Indeed my entire tragedy seems to be grotesque and nothing

else. For as a result of my having suffered myself to be thrust into a trap . . . and I sit in the lowest mire of Malebolge, between Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade. In certain places no one, except those actually insane, is allowed to laugh : and indeed, even in their case, it is against the regulations for conduct : otherwise I think I would laugh at that. . . . For the rest, do not let anyone suppose that I am crediting others with unworthy motives. They really had no motives in life at all. Motives are intellectual things. They had passions merely, and such passions are False Gods that will have victims at all costs, and in the present case have had one wreathed with bay. Now I have

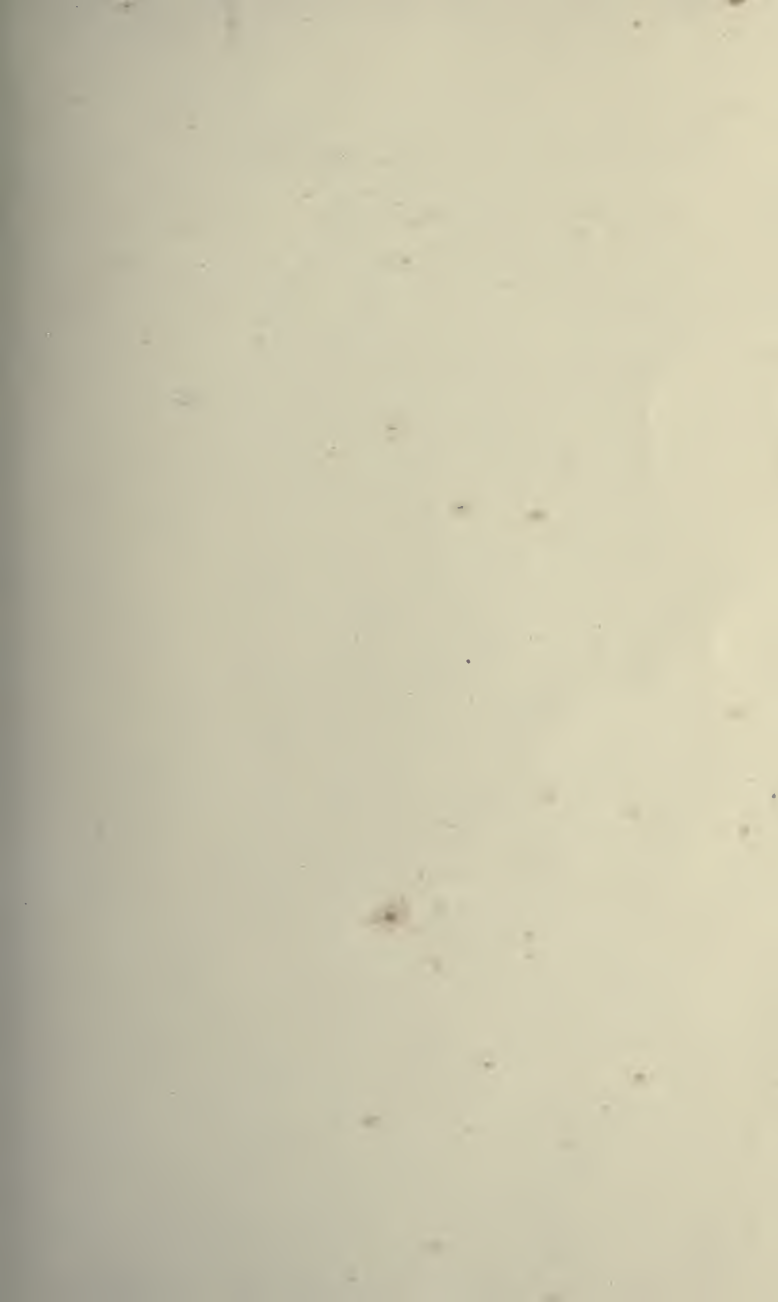
plucked the thorn out — that little scrawled line of yours rankled terribly. I now think merely of your getting quite well again, and writing at last the wonderful story of ——. Pray remember me to your dear mother, and also to Aleck. The “gilded sphinx” is, I suppose, wonderful as ever. And send from me all that in my thoughts and feelings is good, and whatever of remembrance and reverence she will accept, to the lady of Wimbledon, whose soul is a sanctuary for those who are wounded and a house of refuge for those in pain. Do not show this letter to others, nor discuss what I have written in your answer. Tell me about that world of shadows I loved so much. And about the life and the soul

tell me also. I am curious of the things that stung me ; and in my pain there is pity.

Yours,

OSCAR.

FINIS



PR 58/8

2032

1906

